



Espionage and Integrity in Today's World

Presented by

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Robin Robison worked within the Civil Service but left when he became concerned about issues related to 'Truth and Integrity in Public Affairs', a project subsequently set up and supported by The Religious Society of Friends. He currently works in Friends House the central offices of The Quakers in London.



The Preparing for Peace Project

In 2000, Westmorland General Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, began a PEACE initiative, called Preparing for Peace, to explore these questions with international experts and witnesses. This is one of the papers.

The themes were:

- Can we demonstrate that war is obsolete?
- Is war successful in achieving its objectives?
- Can war be controlled or contained?
- What are the costs of war?
- What are the causes of war?
- Can the world move forward to another way?



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From my perspective it is ironic that it was Robin Butler and his colleagues on the 2004 inquiry into the use of intelligence relating to the British decision to go to war in Iraq who “blew the whistle” on Ministerial attempts to keep the Attorney General’s legal advice to the government secret even from a group of privy counsellors. This is ironic because of the job Robin Butler used to do, as Cabinet Secretary to the British Government, and also because of his attempts to restrain me as a young civil servant in 1989, from making further comments on government secrecy and the intelligence services. Clearly the recent decisions in government to use intelligence information in a particular way has sparked off strong discussions and even dissent within Whitehall about how intelligence ought to be used when such crucial decisions are being reached in government. The controversy around the use of intelligence information relating to the war in Iraq raised all the key issues that formed the core of the concerns of British Quakers in the late 1980s. These important issues surfaced time and again throughout the nearly fifteen years that Quakers in Britain worked on these issues at the national level.

This is not the place for a formal review of the work of the Quaker Truth in Public Affairs Committee (TIPA) over a period of thirteen years; rather this essay will explore the continuing relevance of the major concerns of Friends related to intelligence. It is important to remember that intelligence and the covert world were most certainly not the only concern of the TIPA committee. This area of the Committee’s work was certainly the best known, and was an important part of the work but in fact the work as a whole was broader and encompassed not just other issues but the spiritual basis from which the original concern sprang.

So, what has changed since 1989 when I first came across other Quakers who were concerned about the British Secret State? Clearly a great deal, perhaps most importantly the Soviet Union no longer exists and the cold war has come to an end, together with a lot of the international tensions that went with the heightened tension between the two main powers in the world. I was still a member of staff in the Cabinet Office when the Soviet block was crumbling and some considered that history was ending. The cold war had been a good pretext for much covert activity since the end of the Second World War, with western interests being pursued by proxy and in secret across the globe. It was during this time that all the key government and intelligence relationships were forged and although a great deal has changed these relationships still have a massive impact on foreign affairs, both overt and covert. Arguably current international tensions have taken the place of the cold war, and the

structures in place during the last phase of international relations have come in very useful to the established powers.

Within the UK perhaps the biggest change has been a genuine shift in culture which now means that we are no longer the obsessively secret society that we were, even in the mid 1980s when even the existence of cabinet subcommittees was not meant to be public knowledge, with both their purpose and membership kept from the British public. Miscellaneous committees as they were known proliferated under all governments and then as now they were the government's principal means of taking key decisions, and yet they remained totally hidden. Also the whole apparatus of the covert state in Britain is now at least openly talked about and legislated for. How much progress these changes represent is another matter, but that there has been significant change is not in dispute. Until 1988 none of the branches of the UK security and intelligence services had any legislative existence, and in fact all were governed by the vestiges of the royal prerogative, an ancient right of government derived from the power of the medieval monarchs and gradually brought under control by Parliament. This meant that there was no real basis in law for the security and intelligence services to be challenged in the courts, or indeed in Parliament or its committees, although the Home Affairs Select Committee did try to exert some influence through very limited scrutiny.

Now we have both legislation and a Parliamentary committee and a much more open system over all, including limited freedom of information legislation which has just come into force. We can visit government websites to establish the basic structural facts about the services, their structure, even in parts the budgets and main activities of the staff. There is no doubt that this increased openness is welcome. One of the things that concerned me a great deal when I was in the Cabinet office was the extreme secrecy about the structure of the Cabinet subcommittees and about the existence and purpose of the Joint Intelligence Organisation and of the Joint Intelligence Committee. It is not difficult now to know about the basic structure and activities of the principal intelligence services, or even about where they are headquartered. However it is also important to ask how much difference to genuine accountability this increased openness makes to policy and decision making in government.

The reality as opposed to the media image is of course quite different and is highlighted by the decision making process leading up to the most recent conflict in the Gulf and UK and US presence in Iraq. All the background noise tells us that there was no one united view in Whitehall about what the intelligence was telling us about Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction or their capability, and in fact it is clear that the political case presented to Parliament and public was exaggerated, to what extent deliberately is hard to say, although there would seem to be no doubt that in collusion with the USA the UK government at the most senior level decided to go into Iraq for a variety of strategic reasons.

This brings us to the purpose of intelligence. Use of intelligence is of course as old as human civilization and it is not difficult to find examples of spying in the bible, other ancient texts and ancient history. The fact that intelligence and spying are not new does not in itself mean that inevitability makes for moral neutrality, any more than this applied to slavery or to child labour. It was in fact the "morality of spying" which first drew me into the Quaker work which became the Truth and Integrity in Public Affairs programme of Britain Yearly Meeting. As a junior civil servant working for the Joint Intelligence Organisation in the Cabinet Office I was privy to communications from people working as agents for the UK as well as from all kinds of electronic espionage. An article in The Friend (A national Quaker weekly magazine) in 1988 sparked off a train of thought which resulted in my seeking the support of local and

regional Quaker groups. The article in the Friend concerned the issue of the compatibility of espionage with religious belief. The fact is of course that many spies have had a variety of religious belief, all no doubt held with sincerity. A cursory knowledge of Elizabethan England and of the life and death of Christopher Marlow reveal the way in which historically, one's choice of religious belief has been the subject of espionage activity. In the English civil war many of the people who were to become active members of the Society of Friends were on the Parliamentary side and were in some cases deeply involved in the Republican government after the war. George Bishop who joined Friends in 1654, like a number of early Friends had served in Cromwell's New Model Army, and had in fact been a captain. For several years he was the Secretary to the Committee for Examinations, and as such was central to the intelligence operation of the new Republic. Cromwell's government made the collection of good intelligence one of its priorities in order to survive. Bishop proved himself efficient and adept at his job in Whitehall. In January 1651 George Bishop was empowered by the Council of State:

*'to hold intelligence with persons fit for discovering conspiracies against the commonwealth, which intelligence he is to communicate to the Committee for Examinations, to be used for their public advantage, and sums conceived necessary by said committee, for enabling Capt. Bishop to gain intelligence are to be paid by Mr. Frost to him upon their orders, for which he is to give account.'*¹

Bishop is particularly interesting because of the way in which his life so clearly presents us with the tensions and dilemmas which have dominated the past political and social debates in the western world in the last three centuries. One of these dilemmas was the advocacy of violence as part of the plan to achieve Gods Kingdom on earth. Fox himself, in his early days, advocated sacking Rome as a way of ridding humanity of the anti-Christ in the shape of the Pope. For Bishop the end justified the means, so that he was at times ruthless in his role as Secretary of the Committee for Examinations. The Republic was forced to make the gathering of intelligence a priority in order simply to survive the royalist plots; men like Bishop were needed for this work. The effectiveness of Bishop's intelligence could be seen with the Parliamentary victory at Worcester, Bishop's intelligence played an important part in this final defeat for the king.² This is interesting both when we consider his later Quakerism, and also when we think about the kind of world that many of us want to create now. It would seem that Bishop saw no conflict between his desire for a better world and his involvement with espionage. This brings the large questions down to the personal level, this is useful as we all have to make hard decisions, sometimes compromising ourselves, and we all bring hugely different skills, problems, personalities, backgrounds and education to bear on the world around us. Although the past activities of someone like Bishop is not a justification for similar involvement now, it challenges our assumptions and makes us think, both of which are healthy. In looking for a way of personalising the wide sweep of history and ideas figures like Bishop are essential if we are to make any sense of the difficulties in which we often find ourselves now. Bishop and other Quaker leaders were known to be strong supporters of the Republic, indicating the way that the First Friends had no doubts about which side to support, or about being seen as neutral or respectable. Like many other radicals Bishop retreated more into a mystical spirituality after 1660, and the Society of Friends became his permanent spiritual home, as with many others it was the natural place to retreat to once it became clear

¹ See Bishop by Maryann S. Feola

² page 31 of George Bishop by Maryann S. Feola, Sessions of York 1996.

that the New Jerusalem was not going to be ushered in in the near future. There is clearly a very close relationship between Friends' pacifism and their attitude to the exercise of covert power by the state. Quaker pacifism in the 20th century was the issue that most regularly led Friends into opposing the established order and it is this which informed my decision to take the matter to the Society. There is however a wider issue which is of integrity, and taking the meaning of integrity as wholeness, pacifism in this context must mean having our corporate and national lives organised in such a way as to be able to avoid covert activity and lying in order to achieve our objectives or protect ourselves or our way of life.

During the life of the TIPA programme we spent a lot of time and energy addressing the hidden secret nature of the intelligence machinery in the UK. We did not however, assist the Society of Friends to arrive at anything approaching a corporate position on the morality of Spying. To be more comprehensive we did not address the question of whether the Quaker approach to life means we cannot accept espionage or covert activity in the same way that we will not kill or go to war. The implicit assumption by many Friends is that of course we do not accept espionage or covert activity by the State, however the fact remains that the issues around this question are complex and fraught with moral ambiguity.

When it comes to much of what Friends have been concerned about in relation to the Secret State there is no question about where Friends stand. Take the Scott Inquiry from the early into the mid 1990s: the kinds of covert state activity uncovered by Richard Scott in this public Inquiry are exactly what most of us would want changed for good. In particular the abuse of covert government apparatus to secretly fund and arm a dictator in the Middle East because it was convenient for western interests to back one side against another in the Iran/Iraq war during the 1980s. As many people will recall the USA had its own version of this story in its arms for Iraq scandal as well as the Iran/contra scandal. These and many other scandals relating to intelligence and government activity expose an attitude to the use of intelligence and covert operations that is at best morally dubious and in the Quaker approach to life morally corrupt.

A much more grey area would be what could be described as covert policing. In order to stop some criminal activity the police have to employ covert policing. Whilst this kind of police activity is open to abuse the fact is that the methodology is arguably necessary in order to try and prevent criminal activity. By extension the same reasoning can be applied to the Security Service (MI5) in their covert operations intended to observe and trap a terrorist cell planning a bomb or other atrocity. By accepting the need for this kind of intelligence activity by the police and also by other agencies of the State we are automatically accepting a great deal that goes with this approach to problems. The reality of course, is that the vast majority of us live in and benefit from the UK State and therefore we have very few real grounds for complaint about attempts to stop terrorists. We can of course argue that we shouldn't be stating from this position and should be operating in a different kind of world, however, the reality for the time being is that governments have no option but to take preventative action against people intent on criminal activity and worse. The climate of fear since September 11th 2001 has undoubtedly played, to some degree at least, into the hands of those in the State with authoritarian designs; however, there is no doubting the reality of some of the perceived threat to innocent lives. Preventative action does not preclude simultaneous State efforts to address root causes and fundamental policy change.

It is this kind of discussion that has led me to an uncomfortable place in relation to intelligence and covert state activity. On the one hand there is no doubt in my mind that some

kind of secret policing is necessary to prevent murder of innocents; on the other hand acceptance of this kind of state apparatus implies acceptance of a great deal of baggage that goes with it. The fact is, that most of us are not made of the kind of stuff that is necessary to resist all the baggage, much of which comprises a way of life we are used to and comfortable with.

To take this argument still further we are, in the UK inevitably going to rely on imported energy, much of it from unstable areas of the world, for example Russia and the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea area. Without imported energy by around 2025 we will no longer be able to sustain the way of life we are now used to. Some might argue that we should address our attitude to our way of life rather than finding ways to purchase increased energy from different parts of the world. However, again reality has to be faced, and this reality will almost certainly include the fact that it is not politically sustainable for governments to do more than a certain amount to change our energy use, (saving natural disasters which persuade the bulk of the population that radical change is essential.) One of the legislative grounds for the activity by the intelligence services in the UK is to “protect the economic well-being of the UK”, and experience inside the Cabinet Office in the late 1980s, and information that has come to light since, demonstrates that economic intelligence is an important component of the summary of intelligence which the Joint Intelligence Organisation pull together. It is of course unsurprising that economic information should be such an important part of the work of the intelligence services, but this tells us that our way of life as well as our physical security are inextricably linked to the covert world of which we generally know very little.

Records from the past, as well as personal experience have made it clear that there has been, and there continues to be, a relationship between the intelligence service and elements in the City. It is not so much commerce as finance where the ties have been strongest, with records from the early 20th century showing the sometimes close relationship between Barings and Rothschilds Bank and the British Foreign Office. It is not true on the whole to attribute key decisions to the financial world, rather the links are informal and in the past were based on shared values, social experiences and aims rather than carefully designed policies. However the very fact of economic interests being given space in the various pieces of UK intelligence legislation since the late 1980s tells us that it is of central importance to government, and that there are tentacles of the secret state running throughout what is often termed the establishment.

In making the acknowledgement that secret policing and intelligence work is a necessary reality of today's world we are inevitably having to accept some elements of the covert world that we may not approve of. The very fact of these secret organisations existing means that however well democratic societies oversee their activities there will be activities which are hidden certainly from the general public, but also at times the very elected politicians who are meant to be looking over their shoulders. Conversely the build up to the 2004 invasion of Iraq demonstrates how elected politicians can also misuse intelligence for their own complex purposes.

Arguably the UK is now approaching something akin to the situation in the United States where the whole system is much more open to scrutiny. The USA, and the current experience in the UK demonstrates how difficult it is for a democratic society to oversee the secret intelligence services, but also that openness and genuine accountability are not the same thing. I would argue that it is impossible to have perfect accountability for the intelligence

services, but this does not mean that efforts should not be made to continually improve the system that we have. And certainly the current UK system, while unquestionably an improvement on the past is not very robust, with a Parliamentary Committee that is beholden to the Prime Minister and not to Parliament, without the resources to really find out what the whole intelligence apparatus is up to, including the hidden co-operation with the USA and other countries. In order to have a really open and democratic system in relation to covert policing we would have to change the fundamental basis of UK foreign policy, in other words take away some of the reasons for the very existence of the intelligence services in the first place.

The Religious Society of Friends is part of the world as a whole and so we have no choice but to live in a paradox, in other words having a vision of society that has no need of intelligence services, and this is totally in line with our Peace Testimony, where we seek to live “in the life and power that takes away the occasion of all war”, and yet also accepting for the time being that there are covert activities by the state which we realise are often not in accordance with our values. I would argue that in the meantime we have to live with the reality of intelligence services, particularly given the fractured world we live in at the moment; and while remaining vigilant about the kind of democratic system we have in Britain, we must also work with whoever we can to create a more just and therefore more peaceful global society, therefore taking away the occasion for secret dealings that have the potential to undermine the very basis of the kind of world we seek to create.

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Westmorland General Meeting

Westmorland General Meeting is a Meeting for Worship and Business of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), comprising Friends from the Swarthmoor, Kendal and Sedbergh, Lancaster and Preston areas in the north-west corner of England. George Fox, founder of the Society, made his first visit to these towns, villages and dales in 1652, and the region continues to be known among Friends as the birthplace of Quakerism.

Quakers seek "that of God" in everyone, worshipping together in silence without doctrine or creed. For three hundred and fifty years Friends' Peace Testimony has been at the centre of a corporate witness against war and violence, through conscientious objection, conflict resolution, service in the Friends' Ambulance Unit or alternative paths of conscience. In the 21st Century we face fundamental changes to the 'engines of war', and new social and international challenges in a changing world, yet the Peace Testimony of 17th Century Friends still bears powerful witness.

In 1660 Friends declared:

All bloody principles and practices we do utterly deny, with all outward wars, and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatsoever, and this is our testimony to the whole world.

Today the Society's book of 'Advices and Queries' advises members:

We are called to live 'in the virtue of that life and power that takes away the occasion of wars'. Do you faithfully maintain our testimony that war and the preparation for war are inconsistent with the spirit of Christ? Search out whatever in your own way of life may contain the seeds of war. Stand firm in our testimony, even when others commit or prepare to commit acts of violence, yet always remember that they too are children of God.

